



Written Testimony of

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For a Hearing of the

SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP, & BORDER SAFETY

“Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program”

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Dirksen Senate Office Building
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Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify. My name is Bill Canny. I have had the privilege of leading Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) for the past seven years. During that period and over the course of my career, I have witnessed the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) at its highest and lowest points. With each, I have only grown in my appreciation for the program, its life-saving impact, and all those who work to make it one of the most successful humanitarian enterprises in human history.

Our country has a rich tradition of welcoming refugees, even before the creation of USRAP. For the purposes of this hearing, I will focus my remarks on the U.S. Catholic community's ongoing contributions to that legacy, the current state of resettlement, recent ad hoc resettlement efforts, and recommendations for bolstering the Refugee Admissions Program.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S COMMITMENT TO REFUGEES

In 1943, at the height of World War II, the Catholic bishops of the United States established War Relief Services (WRS) as the international humanitarian arm of the National Catholic Welfare Council, a precursor of the USCCB. WRS was entrusted with overseeing the U.S. Church's efforts to serve displaced persons abroad and to extend "help to war-afflicted people, especially children, on the basis of need alone, without reference to race, creed, or other factors."¹ The National Catholic Resettlement Council (NCRC) was subsequently created in 1947 to coordinate the Church's domestic reception and integration efforts. Just a year later, out of 119 Catholic dioceses in the United States at the time, 105 had a resettlement director appointed by the local bishop.² This laid the foundation for the USCCB's current resettlement network.

In the decades following the NCRC's creation, the U.S. Catholic community played a critical role in welcoming hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Soviet Union, Hungary, Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere. When MRS was created in 1965, it assumed responsibility for these efforts. By the mid-1970s, it had become apparent that the ad hoc nature of resettlement featured throughout most of the twentieth century was not sustainable.³ Congress standardized the process of resettlement when it established USRAP in 1980. The USCCB became one of the original resettlement agencies supporting the program. Historically, the USCCB has been the largest of these organizations. Our network, comprised mainly of Catholic Charities agencies, serves about 17% of those being resettled. MRS is also one of two national organizations partnering with the U.S. government to serve children through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) Program.

Since 2010, MRS has operated Parishes Organized to Welcome Immigrants and Refugees (POWIR), a privately funded community sponsorship and engagement program that has mobilized

¹ EILEEN EGAN, *CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES: THE BEGINNING YEARS* 16 (1988).

² Todd Scribner, "Pilgrims of the Night": *The American Catholic Church Responds to the Post-World War II Displaced Persons Crisis*, 124 *AMERICAN CATHOLIC STUDIES* 1, 14 (2013).

³ With each new refugee crisis, it became increasingly apparent that the executive and legislative branches favored differing approaches to refugee admissions. The extensive use of humanitarian parole by the executive was a notable source of conflict. See Deborah Anker, *The Refugee Act of 1980: An Historical Perspective*, 5 *IN DEFENSE OF THE ALIEN* 89, 90–92 (1982).

tens of thousands of volunteers from Catholic dioceses across the country to accompany newcomers. Through POWIR, refugees and other forcibly displaced populations are assisted with language acquisition, job coaching, housing, life skills, mentorship, and cultural orientation, thus improving their ability to achieve self-sufficiency and successfully integrate within American communities. During last year’s project period (May 2021-May 2022), 23 POWIR sites collectively engaged over 2,700 local community organizations, guided over 6,600 volunteers, garnered \$8 million dollars in financial and in-kind donations from their host communities, and served over 12,500 newcomers.

Collectively, these efforts demonstrate the Catholic Church’s longstanding commitment to welcoming newcomers and protecting the life and dignity of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. Our work is motivated by the Gospel, which calls us to welcome the stranger as we would Christ and to see him in all those we serve.⁴ Echoing his predecessors, Pope Francis has been a steadfast advocate of those fleeing persecution, violence, and natural disasters. Throughout his pontificate, he has often spoken about the causes of forced displacement and its challenges, while underscoring the abundant contributions of refugees to the social and economic growth of welcoming communities, especially when “optimized and supported by carefully developed programs and initiatives.”⁵

FOUR DECADES OF USRAP

Much about our country and our world has changed since 1980, but the Refugee Admissions Program remains true to its roots: an expansive public-private partnership, supported by a diverse group of faith-based organizations, representing the Catholic, Jewish, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Evangelical traditions, alongside a number of secular partners. Local agencies and communities across 48 states—from Providence to Houston and Salt Lake City to Sacramento—play a crucial role in welcoming refugees. Meanwhile, those resettled through USRAP continue to be some of the most vulnerable and the most vetted refugees in the world.

Once resettled, these refugees make meaningful contributions to their new communities, including through economic impact. Upon their arrival in the United States, many refugees are eager to begin working to support themselves and their families. On average, refugees work at the same or a higher rate when compared to those born in the United States. Male refugees overall have been shown to have a higher employment rate than their U.S.-born counterparts (67% versus 60%), and female refugees are just as likely as native-born women to be employed.⁶ Many also become entrepreneurs, generating new jobs for the American economy. In 2015, over 181,000 refugee entrepreneurs generated \$4.6 billion in business income.⁷ That same year, refugees are estimated to have contributed \$20.9 billion in federal, state, and local taxes.⁸ With respect to public benefits,

⁴ Matthew 25:31–46.

⁵ Pope Francis, Message for the 108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2022), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20220509-world-migrants-day-2022.html>.

⁶ RANDY CAPPS, ET AL., THE INTEGRATION OUTCOMES OF U.S. REFUGEES: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES 16 (2015), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/UsRefugeeOutcomes-FINALWEB.pdf>.

⁷ NEW AMERICAN ECONOMY, FROM STRUGGLE TO RESILIENCE: THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF REFUGEES IN AMERICA 10 (June 2017), <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/from-struggle-to-resilience-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/>.

⁸ *Id.*

refugees who enter the country between the ages of 18 and 45 pay an estimated \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits over a 20-year period.⁹

In 2020, we commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the Refugee Admissions Program. Unfortunately, one year later, we observed another milestone—an all-time low number of annual admissions, with just over 11,400 refugees admitted that year.¹⁰ This pales in comparison to the historical average of about 80,000 annual admissions,¹¹ spanning both Republican and Democratic administrations. In large part, this decline can be attributed to policies put in place by the prior administration, combined with the devastating toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in 2020, the Presidential Determination (PD) was set at 18,000 admissions, the lowest in the program’s history. This had already followed a temporary prohibition on refugee admissions and three consecutive years of historically low PDs, resulting in significant cuts to staffing and processing infrastructure, as well as the closure of hundreds of local resettlement offices.¹² Beyond the harms inflicted on USRAP itself, this sharp decline in refugee admissions is estimated to have cost the U.S. economy \$9.1 billion per year since 2017.¹³

However, USRAP and those who support its operation, across both government and civil society, have demonstrated a strong resolve and a capacity to adapt. There is perhaps no better illustration of this than the herculean effort undertaken by the resettlement community to welcome almost 80,000 Afghans over the span of a few months in 2021 and 2022.

RECENT AD HOC RESETTLEMENT EFFORTS

Over the past two years, the United States has welcomed multiple groups of forcibly displaced persons outside of the typical USRAP process, relying on the more streamlined mechanism of humanitarian parole. Found in section 212(d)(5) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, humanitarian parole is a discretionary benefit granted by the Secretary of Homeland Security, which allows an individual to temporarily enter and reside in the United States for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit.¹⁴ There are important distinctions between refugee status and humanitarian parole, especially regarding access to resettlement services and long-term integration. While parole remains an important tool, particularly given the current limitations of USRAP in rapidly responding to unforeseen humanitarian crises, it is not an adequate substitute for refugee status, nor should it be used at the expense of USRAP. Moreover, a lack of uniform standards for granting parole and disparities between parole programs recently established for different nationalities raises significant concerns about equity.

⁹ William Evans & Daniel Fitzgerald, THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES OF REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES: EVIDENCE FROM THE ACS 7 (2017), https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w23498/w23498.pdf.

¹⁰ Migration Policy Institute, *U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted, 1980-Present*, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-refugee-resettlement>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Julie Watson, *Broken by Trump, U.S. Refugee Program Aims to Return Stronger*, Associated Press (Jan. 27, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-politics-immigration-coronavirus-pandemic-0a649290b8a6628900598d4324c3d72b>.

¹³ MICHAEL A. CLEMENS, THE ECONOMIC AND FISCAL EFFECTS ON THE UNITED STATES FROM REDUCED NUMBERS OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS 2 (2022), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/economic-and-fiscal-effects-united-states-reduced-numbers-refugees-and-asylum-seekers.pdf>.

¹⁴ 8 U.S.C. § 1182(d)(5).

Operation Allies Welcome

The USCCB was among those first called upon to welcome vulnerable Afghans who supported the U.S. mission and their families when they were relocated to the United States in the weeks leading up to, and directly following, our country's withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. We worked side by side with the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and State, other government agencies, and a host of civil society partners to stabilize the evacuated Afghans at Safe Havens. This effort, dubbed Operation Allies Welcome, presented a massive challenge for the entire resettlement community, following what was already a difficult and unprecedented period for USRAP. Nevertheless, staff, volunteers, and communities quickly mobilized to meet this challenge. The USCCB's network has since resettled over 13,000 of these newcomers.

In September of 2021, Congress specifically authorized these Afghan humanitarian parolees to receive substantially the same services and benefits available to those with refugee status, with the noteworthy exception of a direct pathway to permanent legal status.¹⁵ While many of these Afghans have already become integral members of their new communities, as parolees, they lack the legal certainty typically provided to those with refugee status. There remains an urgent need for Congress to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act to establish a direct pathway to permanent protection and full legal integration for members of this population.

Uniting for Ukraine

Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) was launched in April of 2022 as part of the Biden Administration's commitment to welcome those displaced by the war in Ukraine. While also utilizing humanitarian parole, U4U requires each beneficiary to have a U.S.-based supporter who agrees to provide them with financial support for the duration of their stay in the United States. To date, more than 200,000 applications have been filed for individual Ukrainians by U.S.-based supporters, and over 150,000 of these Ukrainians having been approved to enter the country. Congress also authorized these humanitarian parolees to receive many of the same services and benefits available to those with refugee status, though they still lack a direct pathway to permanent legal status.¹⁶

THE FUTURE OF USRAP

In many ways, the Refugee Admissions Program stands at a crossroads. The program has been slow to restaff and rebuild processing infrastructure, and significant case backlogs continue to delay resettlement and family reunification. So far this fiscal year, out of a possible 125,000 admissions, based on the PD for FY 2023, less than 15,000 refugees have been admitted to the United States, excluding Afghan and Ukrainian parolees who are also being served by resettlement agencies.¹⁷ Of particular concern for the USCCB is the processing of Priority 3 (P-3) family reunification cases, which can take eight years or more to complete due to additional verification requirements. Moreover, a lack of urgency and transparency in processing Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) cases resettled through USRAP has caused thousands of Afghans who

¹⁵ Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022, Pub. L. 117-43.

¹⁶ Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022, Pub. L. 117-128.

¹⁷ REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTER, REFUGEE ADMISSIONS REPORT AS OF FEBRUARY 28, 2023, <https://www.wrapsnet.org/documents/PRM%20Refugee%20Admissions%20Report%20as%20of%2028%20Feb%202023.xlsx>.

provided faithful service to our country to be left behind and increasingly vulnerable to persecution precisely because of the assistance they provided.¹⁸ Not only do these issues inhibit access to life-saving protection and resettlement for qualified individuals, they hinder USRAP's role as a vital foreign policy tool that advances U.S. interests and national security objectives.

That said, there is much opportunity to innovate and improve efficiency within the program. The current administration has made some steps forward in this regard, including the use of concurrent processing, data-driven backlog reduction, and the launch of Welcome Corps. Improvements and expansion of the program are especially important if we are to leverage the more stable and reliable refugee status over temporary pathways, such as humanitarian parole. However, this will require Congress' continued commitment, oversight, and investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOLSTERING REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

To safeguard our nation's proud tradition of resettling refugees and providing humanitarian protection to those in need, we offer the following recommendations to Congress:

- 1. Through robust oversight and consultation, encourage the Administration to reach a monthly arrival rate consistent with 125,000 annual refugee admissions by the end of FY 2023:** Congress has always had an integral role in overseeing and contributing to the operation of USRAP, especially through the mandatory annual consultation process. We encourage Congress to exercise its oversight responsibility throughout the remainder of this fiscal year, pressing the Administration to continue to find ways to better leverage technology, streamline processing, and reduce inefficiencies in the vetting process. As aptly illustrated these past two years, it is in the national interest to have a more agile and effective resettlement program that can respond to sudden crises and scale in times of need. While thorough vetting is crucial for ensuring the integrity of USRAP, it should be carried out in a manner that is fair, meaningful, and efficient. Family reunification, further improving employment outcomes, and increasing the long-term success of all populations served, including through increased service periods, should be prioritized.
- 2. Uphold existing humanitarian protections enshrined in U.S. and international law:** In addition to resettlement through USRAP, asylum is an equally important mechanism for humanitarian protection and access to asylum should be preserved. We urge Congress to reject legislation that would rollback existing humanitarian protections and to utilize its oversight authority to discourage the Administration from taking actions that curtail asylum access or undermine due process for those seeking protection. The USCCB has also previously supported proposed legislative reforms to expand relief for displaced persons and increase transparency in USRAP, such as those included in the Refugee Protection Act and the GRACE Act, measures introduced during prior congresses.
- 3. Provide needed funding for processing, integration, and foreign assistance:** To maintain recent progress in rebuilding our nation's resettlement capacity, especially in response to Operation Allies Welcome and Uniting for Ukraine, and to further these gains,

¹⁸ Jack Detsch & Robbie Gramer, *Afghan Special Immigrant Visas Surge Amid Taliban Crackdown*, FOREIGN POLICY (Mar. 8, 2023), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/08/afghanistan-special-immigrant-visa-biden-taliban-crackdown/>.

Congress must continue to make adequate investments in USRAP. In addition to funding needed to carry out domestic resettlement and integration services, namely those provided through the Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) account of the Department of Health and Human Services, we also call on Congress to appropriate robust funding for the Department of State's Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA), International Disaster Assistance (IDA), and Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) accounts. These accounts support the overseas processing component of USRAP, as well as efforts to minimize forced displacement and improve conditions in host countries, increasing opportunities for displaced persons to succeed in their original countries of asylum and reducing the need for third-country resettlement. Moreover, we urge Congress to continue providing direct appropriations to the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to support backlog reduction and processing carried out by USCIS, not only for the benefit of refugees and asylum seekers but all populations served by the agency. Strategic investment in overseas adjudication is especially needed.

4. **Prioritize the use of USRAP as a more durable and equitable mechanism for humanitarian protection, when possible, rather than temporary protections:** Congress should support a greater use of USRAP for populations in need. This includes the Administration's stated goal of increasing access to USRAP in Latin America. However, when the use of humanitarian parole or other temporary measures is necessitated, Congress and the Administration should work together to ensure beneficiaries have access to support services and long-term integration, including a realistic pathway to permanent legal status.
5. **Enact the bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act:** Afghans recently resettled in the United States deserve a legal pathway to real and lasting safety, which Congress should provide without further delay. In addition to facilitating the full integration of Afghans already in the United States, the Afghan Adjustment Act would improve processing and expand access to the SIV program for those who supported our country, while also helping Congress to hold the Administration accountable.

CONCLUSION

Early on in his presidency, Ronald Reagan described refugee policy as "an important part of our past and fundamental to our national interest."¹⁹ President Reagan recognized that in resettling refugees we further our reputation as a nation of opportunity, a beacon of hope, and an adversary of oppression, while at the same time advancing our national security and foreign policy objectives. Over the past forty years, a strong bipartisan majority of Congress has shared this view. With record levels of forced displacement around the globe, it is my hope and prayer that you will join with communities across our country in supporting, preserving, and strengthening this program for the next forty years and beyond.

As always, the USCCB stands ready to work with Congress and the Administration to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate newcomers, especially those fleeing violence, persecution, and other affronts to human dignity.

¹⁹ President Ronald Reagan, Statement on United States Immigration and Refugee Policy (July 30, 1981), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-united-states-immigration-and-refugee-policy>.